



The Dark Art of Political Intimidation

By Kimberly Strassel Guest Columnist

This is the United States of America. You are totally free to express your political views. No one is going to tell you what you can say or how you can say it, right? But what if you thought you'd be audited by the IRS or have your business boycotted or even lose your job? Would you speak freely then?

This isn't a hypothetical question. It's happening to Americans right now. It's what I call "The Intimidation Game."

The object of this very real "game" is to make political opponents pay a high price for expressing their opinions. It was a standard technique in the Jim Crow South in the 1950's. It was used by racist southern Democrats to shut up black civil rights groups like the NAACP. And now these tactics have been revived and improved upon by today's Democratic Party and their allies on the Progressive Left. They want to shut up conservatives; just like racists once wanted to shut up blacks and their liberal supporters.

They do it in three ways. First, they harass; Second, they investigate and prosecute; and third, they blackmail.

Tactic number one: Harass.

They sic federal and state agencies and bureaucrats on their political enemies. Remember the IRS targeting scandal that began in 2010? That's when the IRS systematically denied or delayed non-profit status to more than 400 citizen-activist groups, almost all conservative. These groups, representing tens of thousands of Americans, clearly met the IRS's tax-exempt standards. But the IRS delay and denial made it impossible for these groups to raise or spend money during the 2012 presidential election. Had they been able to, would the election have turned out differently? We'll never know.

Democrats continue to claim the scandal was the result of some rogue IRS agents who didn't understand the law. Not true.

We know from documents obtained through Congressional investigations and the Freedom of Information Act that the IRS was taking its cue from powerful Democrats and their left-wing allies, like MoveOn.org. For example, Michigan

Senator Carl Levin repeatedly pressured the agency to investigate conservative non-profits. Meanwhile, in speeches, President Barack Obama warned about “shadowy” Tea Party groups. Lois Lerner, the head of the IRS’s non-profit division and a Democratic Party loyalist, took the hint.

Tactic number two: Investigate and prosecute.

In Wisconsin, Democrat prosecutors engaged in a bogus campaign-finance investigation into conservative groups that had supported Wisconsin’s Republican Governor Scott Walker. The prosecutors subpoenaed emails and financial records of the groups and its employees. They staged pre-dawn raids on the homes of Wisconsin conservatives, confiscating computers and correspondence. Then, they warned the victims of these phony investigations and terrorizing raids that they’d go to jail if they told anyone what was happening to them. It took the state Supreme Court to end this use of the government to suppress political opponents. But the message was sent by Democrats in Wisconsin: cross us, and you will pay a steep price.

Tactic number three: Blackmail.

The American Legislative Exchange Council, also known as ALEC, is a nonprofit that is very good at getting free-market legislation passed at the state level. It is supported by a number of corporate donors, Coca-Cola and Kraft once among them. In 2012 left-wing groups – who have long hated ALEC – had an idea: Target ALEC’s corporate donors. Threaten to run ads branding them as racists or climate deniers unless they pull their support. It worked. More than 100 major donors ended their funding.

As if these three tactics weren’t bad enough, the Left has added a new weapon to its intimidation arsenal: forced disclosure of political donors. This is when the names of people who give money to a cause, or a candidate, are made public.

Disclosure can be good when it lets citizens keep track of whose money may be influencing politicians. But it’s bad when it’s used to target and punish average Americans who make political donations.

Left-wing activists in California used financial disclosure records to assemble a searchable map of every person who donated to California’s Prop 8 campaign supporting traditional marriage. The donors on that list had their cars keyed, their windows broken, and their businesses flash-mobbed. Some Prop 8 supporters even lost their jobs, most notably the CEO of Mozilla Firefox, Brendan Eich.

So, how do we stop this intimidation?

First, learn to recognize the Left’s bully tactics. They’re not subtle.

Second, be very wary of initiatives to increase financial disclosure. They sound good, but they're almost always just Left-wing attempts to get new names of people to intimidate.

And finally, we must fight back. They can only win if we let them. We can't let them. Our freedom depends on it.

Kimberly Strassel is a member of The Wall Street Journal editorial board. Prager University helps millions of Americans understand the fundamental values that shaped America and provides the resources to articulate them. Published with permission.

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